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Desert Sands Unified School District OKs budget that slashes \$15.5 million

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The Desert Sun

Two valley districts on state budget watch list

Desert Sands Unified School District passed a \$206.7 million budget on Tuesday that included \$15.5 million in cuts to staffing and programs.

The move comes the same day that California education officials reported a sharp jump in the number of school districts that are facing severe financial stress because of the state's budget crisis.

A record 174 districts may not be able to meet their financial obligations over the next two years, including Desert Sands and Coachella Valley unified school districts.

The Desert Sands board of education on Tuesday unanimously approved the budget and also approved a request for the state to waive required class-size limits.

The district will still need to cut about \$6.7 million in 2011-12 and another \$7 million in 2012-13 to meet the state required 3 percent reserves, said Karen Stone, district director of Fiscal Services.

"I don't know how we're going to get there," Assistant Superintendent of Business Services Cindy McDaniel said.

The district already eliminated high school transportation and adult education, limited summer school, laid off about 200 employees and cut school site discretionary funds by 15 percent.

Management agreed to take five furlough days and district officials are negotiating for the same from teachers and classified employees to shorten the 2010-11 school year.

The board already has approved increasing class size to an average 31 to 33 students — though actual class sizes may be significantly larger.

Elementary school classes that retired teacher Kathy Kronemeyer volunteered in last year were as

large as 35 to 37 students.

"You can't walk from one side to the other," said Kronemeyer, who taught for 40 years at Desert Sands, adding that the lowest- and highest- performing students lose needed extra attention in the large classes.

She has had more than 30 students in her classroom in the past, but she also had a full-time aide and the standards were less stringent, Kronemeyer said.

"I know that there are (fiscal) problems," she said. "But I just think somebody needs to keep remembering that the children are the ones that keep losing."

The class-size waiver would make the fire marshal's capacity requirements the only limit on class size, McDaniel said.

Square footage in a typical classroom would allow for about 40 students, she said.

The district is adding backpack hooks outside all elementary school classes to save space inside the classrooms, McDaniel said.

"It's a something little but it's a way to keep the clutter out of the classroom," she added.

Board members said Tuesday that decreasing class sizes would be a priority if the budget picture improves.

"It's been our position on the board to keep class sizes as small as we can for as long as we can," Board President Gary Tomak said.

Without the waiver, Desert Sands would receive less state funding for each student over the class-size limit.

The district would have received an additional \$36.5 million in 2010-11 if the state had not cut funding.

"Are we willing to let our schools fail?" asked Debra Jenkins Garcia, media technician at Lyndon B. Johnson Elementary — a position that was eliminated as part of budget cuts. "Isn't that what it comes down to?"

Additional Facts

Budgets in trouble

School budgets in trouble

Desert Sands Unified School District and Coachella Valley Unified School District both fell on a state watch list of districts in danger of not meeting financial obligations for the next three fiscal years.

Coachella Valley Unified, which officially approved its budget by a 5-0 vote on Tuesday, is about \$6

million short for 2010-11.

Desert Sands Unified expects to make about \$14 million in cuts in the following two fiscal years.

They are among 160 districts in California to file qualified interim reports in March — a record number in the state and a jump of 38 percent over last year, according to the state Department of Education.

A qualified report means they may not be able to meet their obligations for the next two fiscal years.

Another 14 districts are in danger of not meeting financial obligations in the current or next fiscal year and filed “negative” certifications.

Actual budgets passed by the boards on Tuesday do not require a certification, but Desert Sands would be filing “qualified” for 2010-11 if it did, Assistant Superintendent of Business Services Cindy McDaniel said Tuesday.

Public education received \$17 billion less than anticipated over the past two years,

“Schools on this list are now forced to make terrible decisions to cut programs and services that students need or face bankruptcy,” State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell said in a news release.

“These statistics illustrate what a dire situation our schools are in,” O'Connell said.

O'Connell warned that the finances of California school districts will worsen if the state makes further cuts to education as Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proposed in his 2010-11 budget. Districts are also running out of federal stimulus funds that helped them avoid painful cuts over the past year, he added.

Districts that can't meet their financial obligations can apply for a state loan but must give up control of their school systems to the state. Six districts that ran out of financial options are currently under state receivership.

“These unprecedented cuts are changing the face of education for an entire generation of students,” said Frank Pugh, president of the California School Boards Association.

- The Associated Press contributed to this story.
